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Cutting into the Meatpacking Line: Workers and Change in the Rural Midwest

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bibliography. Another concern is the absence of population figures that would make it possible to compare crime rates in the nine counties he studied with other rural regions during the same period. It is also a shame that the publisher did not typeset the manuscript and spend a little editorial time to improve the quality of the tables and correct footnoting errors in chapter four. Nonetheless, Wertsch has provided a useful discussion of rural crime in Iowa that will interest many readers. His study may encourage other historians to study rural crime and give it the recognition it deserves.

Cutting into the Meatpacking Line: Workers and Change in the Rural Midwest, by Deborah Fink. Studies in Rural Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xv, 235 pp. Illustrations, map, tables, notes, index. $45.00 cloth, $17.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY WILSON J. WARREN, INDIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

Deborah Fink's book is an important contribution to the growing literature on contemporary working-class life in the rural Midwest. Focusing on how Iowa's meatpacking industry has affected rural workers and communities, her study provides a sobering counterweight to facile examinations of resurgent rural population growth that fail to convey the seamy economic underpinnings of much of that growth (see, for example, "The Rural Rebound" in the spring 1998 issue of the *Wilson Quarterly*).

Blending anthropological and historical approaches, Fink bases her analysis on a four-month stint working in the IBP pork packing plant in Perry, Iowa, in 1992. Although lacking the dramatic narration and radical call to action of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Fink's participant-observer perspective, her use of extensive interview testimony, and her survey of the recent historical and social science literature on the industry and its workers convey much of the same forcefulness as did Sinclair's book nearly a century ago. Fink's work mirrors many of Sinclair's findings on the dreadfulness of packinghouse work, and suggests, sadly enough, how working conditions in the industry have gone full circle over the course of the twentieth century.

Fink focuses on three themes: the continuity of rural economic and social dislocations in the twentieth century, the significance of rural workers in Iowa's history, and the importance of gender, ethnicity, and racial issues in rural midwestern history. She develops the first two themes by focusing on the evolution of meatpacking in Perry from the opening of its first plant, Hausserman Packing Company, in 1920 through IBP's recent location there.

Although not meant to provide a comprehensive analysis of the revolution in the packing business since the 1960s, Fink's work nonetheless yields considerable insight into the impact these changes have had on rural communities. IBP has been the leader of this revolution. In an industry with historically narrow profit margins, the company dramatically cut costs by locating plants in rural locations, consolidating the final cutting and packaging operations in the same plants that killed and cut animals, and employing advanced technology to eliminate much of the skilled knife work that used to accompany the killing and cutting processes. The new technology also has created a much faster work pace. IBP, followed by two other agribusiness giants, ConAgra and Cargill, then squeezed out other packers who relied on more urban, skilled, and unionized workers. Since the 1980s, the meatpacking industry, dominated by this new Big Three, has preyed upon small midwestern towns for their workers. Many rural workers, desperate for even the marginal wages provided in an industry that is only moderately union-organized by the largely ineffective and compliant United Food and Commercial Workers, toil for only a few months before being burned out by the rapid pace and injurious work environment. Fink, who worked for four months at Perry's IBP plant, lasted longer than many of her coworkers.

Regarding the importance of gender, Fink explains that women's work had always been integral to farm life in the Midwest but was at the same time denigrated by both rural men and women. When employment opportunities for women in meatpacking increased during and after World War II, this "contradiction . . . conditioned their movement into the formal labor market" (78). Women were typically not allowed to take jobs in the better-paying knife-wielding categories, but instead were employed in processing and packaging jobs. Particularly after the structural changes in the packing industry since the 1960s, the deskilling process has allowed the corporate giants to hire even more women, but at the price of pitting women against men, both in terms of undermining masculine pride in skilled knife work and by using women's lower wages to subsidize men's somewhat higher pay.

Increased employment of nonwhites has also accompanied the industry's changes since 1960. In Perry's IBP plant in the early 1990s, Fink points out that about one-third of the workers were Latino, about one-tenth black, and another one-tenth Asian. Most were not locals; indeed, IBP has exploited national and international labor markets since the 1969 strike in Dakota City and Fort Dodge, when Mexicans were hired for the first time. Not only does this enable IBP to keep its wages lower, it also consciously plays upon the prejudices that Iowa-born whites tend to hold against the newcomers. In turn, friction

among workers makes local unions, where they exist, less effective in combating low pay and poor working conditions. Less obvious but also driving this recruitment is the fact that the brutal and injurious pace of work in the new-style packing plants usually uses up the local rural labor force within a short span of time.

Fink's analysis of the history of racial and ethnic hostility among rural Iowa workers is a bit overstated, primarily because, as she points out, the population of rural Iowa has been even more white than that of the state as a whole. While the very few blacks in Perry's history were obviously slighted and ignored by the town's overwhelmingly white majority, the 1990s "explosion of ethnic diversity" (136) in rural Iowa is virtually unprecedented. Only the racial diversity in a few small coal-mining communities such as Buxton at the turn of the twentieth century is comparable.

Much more compelling is Fink's focus on the history of class divisions among rural Iowans. She is especially perceptive in describing how rural workers have failed to understand how their interests coincide with other workers'. From the end of World War II through the 1960s, Iowa's AFL-CIO unions consistently pitched solidarity to rural workers with mixed results in terms of gaining new union members or changing their political loyalties. While Perry's workers have exercised a more concerted political and economic voice since the 1960s, they and other rural workers across the state have not influenced the recent course of economic development. State government and corporate-led development rarely considers rural workers' concerns about dignity and control.

Cutting into the Meatpacking Line is a powerful contribution to our understanding of the rural working class. Anyone concerned about the economic and social conditions of rural America should pay close attention to this book.

Always a People: Oral Histories of Contemporary Woodland Indians, edited by Rita Kohn and W. Lynwood Montell with an introduction by R. David Edmunds. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. xix, 297 pp. Portraits, index. $35.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY S. CAROL BERG, COLLEGE OF ST. BENEDICT

Thanks to Hollywood and television westerns, generations of Americans are familiar with the Plains Indians, but until quite recently Woodland People have not received the attention they deserve, given their rich cultures and persistence in the eastern United States. *Always*